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"POWER FROM THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE": the Communist Party of China and Political Reform with Chinese Characteristics

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In recent years the Communist Party of China (CPC) has shown an increasing concern for basing its legitimacy on the support of the people as well as the need to continue to deserve the people's support. On 1 September 2010, in a speech to the Party School of the Central Committee, Xi Jinping (who would go on to become General Secretary of the CPC in 2012, and President of the PRC thereafter) called on Party members to have a "correct view of the world, of power and of their work" and defined "citizen empowerment" (公民赋权 *gōngmín fù quán*), by saying, "the Marxist view of power can be summed up in two phrases: power is given by the people, and power is used for the people [权为民所赋, 权为民所用 *quán wéi mín suǒ fù, quán wéi mín suǒ yòng*]." To Euroamerican ears this recalls (but not entirely) Abraham Lincoln's definition from the Gettysburg Address: "Government of the people, by the people, for the people".

The Party's preoccupation with maintaining its "ruling status" demonstrates a concern with legitimacy and with the mechanisms that are needed to gain and maintain legitimacy.

The CPC runs the risk of losing power were it to lose the support of the people and that there is no guarantee of the people's support: the Party must earn it.

Only if the Party is in power can it work to improve the people's standard of living; only if it improves the people's standard of living can it hope to remain in power. Which comes first?

The current fight against corruption is an example of the Party's concern for the people's perception of Party governance.

Thinkers like Sun Yat-sen tried to explain Euroamerican concepts to a Chinese society that did not share the Euroamerican tradition. Now it has become necessary to explain the new Chinese concepts of political reform to Euroamerican societies that do not share the Chinese tradition. In one tradition people are accustomed to being selected; in the other, to being elected.

The Party-State's ability to manage modernisation, to maintain institutional stability, to sustain the rate of economic growth (efficiency), and to equitably distribute wealth (equity) are the factors that give it political legitimacy. Therefore, there are three key elements for the country's future: stability, efficiency and equity.

There is no separation between the CPC and the State Administration, a situation that rules out alternation in power, but the possibility of a loss of legitimacy because of mismanagement could precipitate social movements that might alter the political.

On 4 September 2014 in a meeting with foreign experts that I attended in Beijing as part of *The Party and the World Dialogue 2014* dedicated to *China's New Reforms: the Role of the Party*, the Vice-President of China, Li Yuan-chao, stated quite clearly that the CPC runs the risk of losing power were it to lose the support of the people and that there is no guarantee of the people's support: the Party must earn it.

The previous administration had already raised the risk of the Party losing the support of the people unless it performed well. On 5 December 2002, then General Secretary and President Hu Jintao said, "Leading cadres at all levels must continue to work at the grassroots level, going among the masses, listening to the call of the masses, tending to the hardships of the masses, exercising power for the people, empathizing with the feelings of the people, and working for the well-being of the people."

The Hong Kong media¹ summed this up as the “new three principles of the people” (新三民主義 *xīn sānmínzhǔyì*), alluding to the early 20th century political philosophy of Sun Yat-sen, and these principles were later written into official Party documents.

Sun Yat-sen’s original “three principles of the people” (三民主義 *sānmínzhǔyì*), so-called because each begins with the term “people” (民 *mín*), were: “nationalism” (民族主義 *mínzúzhǔyì*) where 民族 *mínzú* refers to the people’s common ethnicity, “democracy” or “people power” (民權主義 *mínquánzhǔyì*) where the term 權 *quán* refers to “power” or to the people holding the balance of power, and “welfare” or “livelihood” of the people (民生主義 *mínshēngzhǔyì*), or “socialism” in the eyes of the PRC. Xi Jinping’s use of the phrase “power is given by the people” (權為民所賦 *quán wéi mín suǒ fù*) builds on Hu Jintao’s three new principles by defining the origin of power.

On various occasions Hu Jintao warned that the CPC’s “ruling status” (執政地位 *zhízheng dìwèi*) is not guaranteed. A 2004 Party document entitled *Decision on the Strengthening of the Chinese Communist Party’s Ruling Ability* states that “the Party’s ruling status is not a birthright, nor is it permanent”. In 2008 the *People’s Daily* quoted Hu Jintao as saying: “The Party’s core ruling status is not permanent, possession in the past does not equate to possession in the present, and possession in the present does not equate to possession in the future.” In 2011 Hu reiterated, “leading cadres at vari-

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ous levels must bear in mind that the power in our hands was vested by the people.”

In 2010, former Prime Minister Wen Jiabao made “seven references to political reform” (七談政改風波 *qī tán zhèng gǎibiǎn fēngbō*), telling a CNN interviewer that “the people’s wishes for, and needs for, democracy and freedom are irresistible.” He stressed the need to protect civil rights (保障權利 *bǎozhàng quánlì*) and to restrict government power (制約權力 *zhìyuē quánlì*).

Wen Jiabao’s calls for political reform during the previous administration were contested in March 2011 by Wu Bangguo, then chairman of the National People’s Congress and member of the Politburo Standing Committee, who proclaimed the “Five Will Nots” (五不告 *wǔbùgào*): China will not do rotational multiparty rule, will not do diversity of guiding ideologies, will not do “separation of powers”, will not do a bicameral system, and will not do privatisation of property. This thorough rejection of the liberal parliamentary model developed in the “West” has its origins in Deng

Xiaoping’s 1987 rejection of “the separation of three powers” (三權分立 *sānquán fēnlì*), the division of political power into the executive, legislative and judiciary branches of government.

Now that Xi Jinping is in charge of administering power and has reiterated the people as the source of power and the responsibility of the Party vis-à-vis the people, the current administration is trying to build on the principles of political reform defended by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao in a gradual fashion. The latest Plenum of the CPC in October 2014 was dedicated to implementing 法治 *fǎzhì*, a compound term that combines 法 *fǎ* “law” and 治 *zhì* “governance”, meaning that the laws should be used to govern, that governance should not be arbitrary.

The Party’s preoccupation with maintaining its “ruling status” demonstrates a concern with legitimacy and with the mechanisms that are needed to gain and maintain legitimacy. It also represents a dilemma. Only if the Party is in power can it work to improve the people’s standard of living; only if it improves the people’s standard of living can it hope to remain in power. Which comes first? A recent Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Survey² indicate that the Chinese people’s level of satisfaction with their government is much higher than that of most other peoples around the world with other government systems, a factor of legitimacy that is often emphasised by spokespersons for the CPC government system.

The current fight against corruption is an example of the Party’s concern for the people’s perception of Party governance. At the same time the CPC is emphasising

closer attention to the people’s needs. This involves two processes. The first step is “consulting the grass roots” (基層民主協商 *jīcéng mínzhǔ xiéshāng*). CPC officials try to survey the grass-roots in order to determine the difficulties, problems and concerns for which the people want solutions. The second step is to commission “experts and scholars” (專家學者 *zhuānjiā xuézhě*) from think tanks and research centres to propose solutions to the concerns raised in the first step. The Party then has the role of arbitrating competing needs and proposals for the common good. If the CPC succeeds in satisfying the people’s needs it will have gained the people’s support, and legitimacy. If it fails to do so, it will lose their support and its own legitimacy.

The great turnaround in the socialist revolution in China engineered by Deng Xiaoping and maintained by successive administrations has been based since 1978 on the policy of “reform and opening up” (改革開放 *gǎigé kāifàng*), reforming the economy by the introduction of market forces and opening up the economy by abandoning autarchy in favour of Foreign Direct Investment. In the late 1980’s, Deng Xiaoping

1. China Media Project. The University of Hong Kong. [Date accessed 15.12.2014] <http://cmp.hku.hk/>

2. Pew Research Center. *Global Attitudes Survey*. [Date accessed 15.12.2014] <http://www.businessinsider.com/pew-research-global-satisfaction-map-2014-2>

pointed out that it is impossible to redistribute wealth that does not exist and promoted the creation of wealth as a precondition to building a future socialist society, even if this meant that some would become wealthy sooner than others. The period from the founding of the PRC in 1949 until the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 accumulated capital through the promotion of heavy industry, laying the foundation for a second revolution based on light industry and consumer consumption.

The *Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China*, the official CPC verdict on Mao's contribution to the modernisation of China published in 1981 stated that his policies had been right 70% of the time but wrong 30% of the time. Xi Jinping has given a new orientation to the evaluation of the history of the revolution by dividing it into two thirty year periods and saying that the first thirty years (the Maoist years) cannot be judged on the basis of the second thirty years (the Dengist years), nor can the second thirty years be judged on the basis of the first thirty years, thus neatly defending both the Maoist and the Dengist versions of the primitive accumulation of capital and fending off both the old guard of hard-line conservatives in the Party and the upcoming generations that demand an acceleration of the liberalisation of the economy.

A corollary to Xi's new periodisation of the history of the PRC is that another thirty year period has now begun. The first thirty years of radical Maoist egalitarianism and voluntarism guaranteed everyone a minimum quality of life but at the cost of a minimum standard of living. The second thirty years of Deng's socialist market economy notably improved everyone's standard of living but at the cost of growing inequalities among regions and sectors of the population. The next thirty years begin with a fundamental and qualitative change in the nature of China's modernisation. As economic growth increases, not everyone benefits to the same extent. As a result the number of vested interests of "the haves" increases but so does the level of discontent of "the have nots", and the government system can no longer count on the same degree of popular support unless it manages to arbitrate well the conflicting demands of the vested interests of the elites and the common good, of wealth and the commonwealth.

This makes the maintenance of stability a fundamental necessity, a factor that explains the CPC's concern with maintaining social control and its insistence that only the Party-State system can correctly arbitrate the next phase of the revolution. The PRC's only experience of direct participatory democracy was the Cultural Revolution, a negative example because the creation of "bottom-up" assemblies and the unhindered actions of "Red Guards" lead to lawlessness and disorder. The CPC insists that individual political parties in a multi-party electoral system each represent only part of the population, only represent some of the vested interests, but that no party in a multi-party electoral system

can represent all of the population, all of the interests. This is the role the CPC envisages for itself. It is the power structure that would allow the CPC to construct the "Chinese dream" (中国梦 *Zhōngguó mèng*) during the coming period.

Political reform with Chinese characteristics (中国特色 *Zhōngguó tèsè*) has been part of the debate about modernity in China since the 19th century. Sun Yat-sen was just one of many Chinese thinkers who saw a need to adapt Euroamerican ideas of political order to the specific circumstances of China by distinguishing the power of politics or the sovereignty of the people (政权 *zhèngquán*) from governance (治权 *zhìquán*).

The people were meant to authorise the government by means of four mechanisms: universal suffrage to elect officials (选举 *xuǎnjǔ*), the power of recall of elected officials (罢免 *bàimiǎn*), the capacity to initiate legislation by means of petitions (创制 *chuàngzhì*), and recourse to referenda in order to ratify legislation (复决 *fùjué*). But for Sun Yat-sen the sovereignty of the people was one thing and governance was something else, something to be carried out by experts, by technocrats, who would have to consult the people and answer to the people in order to ratify their support.

He proposed the introduction of the Euroamerican separation of powers into three branches of government –legislative (立法 *lǐfǎ*), executive (行政 *xíngzhèng*) and judiciary (司法 *sīfǎ*)– but he also saw the need to include two additional

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branches that had their origins in the Chinese meritocratic political tradition –a meritocratic civil service (考试 *kǎoshì*) and an ombudsman-like supervision of government (监察 *jiānchá*). He saw his proposals as an improvement on the systems established in the West, and thought them better suited to Chinese purposes.

The current debate on political reform in China should be studied in a similar context of adapting basic principles of government on behalf of the people in ways that respect the sovereignty of the people. But the situation has been reversed. Thinkers like Sun Yat-sen were trying to explain Euroamerican concepts to a Chinese society that did not share the Euroamerican tradition. Now it has become necessary to explain the new Chinese concepts of political reform to Euroamerican societies that do not share the Chinese tradition. Because both the concepts and the terminology being used in Chinese are unfamiliar in the West, and because the established concepts and terminology of Euroamerican political theory have pre-existing connotations in the West that are not isomorphic with Chinese theory, we need to establish cross-cultural paradigms and methodologies in order to explain to each other the bases and the consequences of our differing theories. Otherwise there will be cultural barriers that prevent Euroamericans from understanding the differing connotations of 人/仁 *rén* (altruism; contextualised

relationships; social roles) and “individual/person”, for instance, which lead to an emphasis on social roles and mutual obligations in the case of 人/仁 *rén* but to essentialist concept of rights in the case of “individual”.

Another major area of differing perceptions concerns the emphasis on meritocracy in the Chinese tradition versus the emphasis on suffrage and openly elected representatives in the Euroamerican democratic tradition. In one tradition people are accustomed to being selected; in the other, to being elected.

This concept is also closely associated with the concept of legitimacy, and the demonstration of legitimacy. In the case of China, the Party-State’s ability to manage modernisation, to maintain institutional stability, to sustain the rate of economic growth (efficiency), and to equitably distribute wealth (equity) are the factors that give it political legitimacy. Therefore, there are three key elements for the country’s future: stability, efficiency and equity. There is no separation between the CPC and the State Administration, a situation that rules out alternation in power, but the possibility of a loss of legitimacy because of mismanagement could

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precipitate social movements that might alter the political *status quo*. The political management of these risks requires the maintenance of sustained but also sustainable economic growth, and an equitable redistribution of wealth, accompanied by political reform that would not destabilise the country.

Meritocracy is deeply rooted in Chinese political and social thought. For Confucius and his followers, the Sovereign had to merit his position on the basis of moral quality. Not everyone deserved to rule. For the Legalists, who created the State administration in the 4th century BC, those who governed had to be experts in governance. In his textbook study *The Origins of Political Order*, Francis Fukuyama³ credits China with the creation of the State as a means of combating what Max Weber defined as *patrimonialism* –today’s “vested interests” of “the elites”- and with the creation of a centralised bureaucracy based on meritocracy to administer the State in favour of that which is public (公 *gōng*) instead of that which is private (私 *sī*) in order to guarantee the common good. As a result political order in China would be based on altruism and contextualised relationships or social roles (仁 *rén*) organised by hierarchical (孝 *xiào*) but shifting fiduciary relationships. Thus, in comparison with modern Europe, there was in political terms a “China model” (中国模式 *Zhōngguó móshì*) with “Chinese characteristics” (中国特色 *Zhōngguó tèshè*) from the outset. Any comparative study of po-

litical reform with Chinese characteristics must keep these differences in mind.

The reformist and revolutionary thinkers who wanted to import Western democracy to modernise China came to doubt the efficacy of passing too rapidly from an autocratic monarchy to a populist free-for-all (as they saw things). Democracy in the West was the product of centuries of political, economic and social evolution. China needed time to prepare itself for democracy. Sun Yat-sen did not think the adoption of the executive, legislative and judicial branches would work without a meritocratic bureaucracy and a body to oversee those who governed. He thought the technocrats should govern and periodically seek confirmation of the support of the people, not that the people should govern directly, nor directly choose those who would govern them.

The Chinese defense of meritocracy as an alternative to democracy should be examined on its own merits and not simply dismissed out of hand. Chinese political scientists distinguish between “elective democracy” and “consultative democracy”. They distrust the former because it does not guarantee that those who are elected would actually be

competent to govern, either ethically or in terms of competence. On the other hand, they do say that power comes from the people and the technocrats must administer power on their behalf,

so the people must be consulted. This leads to a principle of pre-selection in the electoral processes that do exist in China at the local level and within the CPC.

It would be easy to say that such a process will only allow for candidates who are favourable to the selectors’ policies, but there is a long historical and philosophical tradition behind this line of thinking. It is also easy to say that electors in the West are allowed to vote for the candidate of their choice when in practice they also have little choice over which candidates the competing political parties will allow to stand for election, candidates chosen on the basis of compatibility with party policy. In general they can only vote for the candidates who are presented to them by the political parties, not necessarily for the candidates they would like to see put forward. This kind of party politics in the West has led to a crisis in the system, crippling any possibility of a broad consensus through radical ideological bipolarisation, permitting the growth of inequality by catering to vested interests (including the vested interests of the political parties’ own internal bureaucracies) and provoking the phenomenon of broadly based social protest movements such as the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* in Italy or *Podemos* in Spain, because growing segments of the population do not trust the competence (or moral fibre) of party candidates to solve their problems.

Thus the debate on political reform that is taking place inside the CCP is extremely important and needs to be better understood outside of China. Distinguishing “formal” democracy (形式民主 *xíngshì mínzhǔ* or 民主机制 *mínzhǔ jīzhì* or 正式民主 *zhèngshì mínzhǔ*) from “substantive” democracy (实质民主 *shízhì mínzhǔ*) is one difficulty. Formal

3. FUKUYAMA, Francis. *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011.

democracy in Mexico did not prevent the same political party from holding power for 73 years, nor has it guaranteed stability in Iraq or Afghanistan, but what is substantive democracy and how does it evolve? For some, this distinction is an attempt to avoid the introduction of elections; for others, it is a serious debate in political philosophy. In any case, it must be taken into consideration in the framework of a serious dialogue on political reform. In the case of intra-Party democracy what are the distinctions between and justifications of such current terms in Chinese political science as “deliberative democracy” (协商民主 *xiéshāng mínzhǔ*) –seen as being correct- as opposed to “elective democracy” (选举民主 *xuǎnjǔ mínzhǔ*) –seen as being incorrect; or between “differential (multi-candidate) election” (差额选举 *chā'é xuǎnjǔ*) and “mutual nomination” (公推直选 *gōngtuī zhíxuǎn*)? What is the emerging role of “informal” or “non-governmental” or “civil” society (民间社会 *mínjiān shèhuì*) and what will it become? Is the CPC a political party or an entire political system? Can it be compared to political parties in Western liberal democracies? Is this a useful comparison? If power comes from the people, and is exercised on behalf of the people, how can the CPC demonstrate that it is accountable to the people? How can the people show they do –or do not- support the CPC? How would the CPC respond to a loss of support? If Chinese people have been accustomed for thousands of years to being selected rather than to being elected, under what circumstances should direct election be a valid and efficient process of selection?

The 21st century construction of a new Chinese discourse on political theory and political reform faces the same dilemma that Chinese intellectuals first identified in the 19th century, of making Eurocentric sociocultural, economic and political theory and *praxis* compatible with Sinocentric sociocultural, economic and political circumstances. At the same time, among Chinese thinkers and strategists, there is a growing self-confidence in the Chinese ability to lead a new post-Western world order. Euroamerican faith in the convergence of all societies into a single economic, social and political model that is part of the heritage of the Enlightenment is challenged by the emergence of new economic powers outside the Euroamerican sphere that resist this model. As a result of the absolutism, universalism and essentialism that characterise thought in the West, many Euroamerican analysts conclude that China will seek to impose its alternative model as a new unique and universal model, a conclusion that is symptomatic of a tendency to attribute the motives of one’s own behaviour to another, but the divergence between the “Beijing Consensus” and the “Washington consensus” is not necessarily an example of dichotomy or antinomy. As opposed to mutually exclusive antinomies and dichotomies in Western thought, 阴阳 *yīnyáng*, the ideal of maintaining plurality and diversity in a harmonious relationship as an alternative to one track thinking and exclusive orthodoxy, is a fundamental component of the Chinese tradition, not the Euroamerican tradition. Marxism, whether Maoist or Dengist in tendency, has its origins in an absolutist and essentialist tradition

of Western thinking. “Chinese characteristics” are part of an on-going historical process of trying to adapt it (and its competitor: “Adam Smithism”) to Chinese circumstances. In the past it was the Chinese State that had to provide the adequate conditions for harmony and plurality, without allowing competing factions of patrimonialist elites to get the upper hand. Today the CPC sees itself as the Chinese State, playing the same role as the traditional State.

The fact that Chinese strategists often link their new political theories to the ideas of ancient Chinese strategists demonstrates the continuity of a long-term perception of political strategy with Chinese characteristics. Unlike the standard Euroamerican theory of “rational choice”, based on cost-benefit analysis or instrumental rationalism, Chinese culture has traditionally preferred make order (正 *zhèng*) and harmony (和 *hé*) compatible as alternatives to disorder (乱 *luàn*), has preferred cooperation (合作 *hézuò*) to competition (竞争 *jìngzhēng*), as well as mutual benefit (互利 *hùlì*) and “win-win” diplomacy (共赢 *gòngyíng*) in the development of various political strategies that suit China’s own culture and circumstances and in order to avoid the worst and achieve the best of any political order.

A geopolitical power shift has occurred, but the paradigms that dominate Euroamerican political theory have not shifted.

Of course there is a danger of *exceptionalism* in a more relativistic approach to political theory or in a purely Sinocentric approach, but the West is not exempt from an accusation of reverse exceptionalism when it insists that its theories are the only acceptable theories, that is to say, when the West attributes the characteristic of *universal* to its own historically and culturally contingent theories.

In his study of the ancient origins of political authority in China, the renowned Chinese archaeologist Chang Kwang-Chih⁴ (Zhang Guangzhi) addressed this issue.

“Theories of history have typically been built on the history of Western civilization. In the modern world, Western civilization has undergone the most remarkable expansion in the annals of mankind, quickly enveloping the globe, and it has brought with it theories formulated on the basis of its own formidable and massive history to explain the origin and history of all human society. Since these theories occasionally guided social and political activists in their endeavours to change the world, they are of more than academic interest. ... It is time to consider the possibility that theories of history could be built on the development of other civilizations and that such theories could offer new insights, not only relating to abstract principles about the past but also to political action in the future. (...) When China and the West encountered each other in the nineteenth and early twentieth

4. CHANG, Kwang-Chih. *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.

centuries, there was initially a one-way flow of sociological theory from West to East. (...) The issue of the rise of political authority is one that pertains to every ancient civilization. But it is only now, when new data have become available, that we can seriously begin to explore the question in the light of Chinese facts. The process that emerges from such an exploration might be identical with those that have been hypothesized by Western theorists, on the basis of the history of Western civilization; but it might also be significantly different."

Curricula and theoretical frameworks for political science courses in the Euroamerican context are dominated by a limited number of paradigms that tend to become "paradogmas" that reflect an unquestioned or unproblematised Eurocentric or Euroamericentric bias. They lack intellectual and theoretical diversity. A geopolitical power shift has occurred, but the paradigms that dominate Euroamerican political theory have not shifted. Does the West run the risk of falling prey to the Maginot Line Syndrome, preparing obsolete defences of political systems and paradigms based on Westphalian nation-states for a post Bretton Woods world order that has moved the Rest into uncharted territory?

We need to establish cross-cultural paradigms and methodologies in order to explain to each other the bases and the consequences of our differing theories.